

The background of the entire page is a dense, close-up photograph of numerous smooth, rounded pebbles. The pebbles come in a wide variety of colors, including shades of blue, green, yellow, orange, red, brown, grey, and white. They are scattered across the entire surface, creating a textured and vibrant backdrop.

Briefing Paper 7

Lone parents in Brighton & Hove: engagement with education and training

Tamsin Hinton-Smith

Department of Sociology
University of Sussex

The Equal funding stream is part of the European Union's Lisbon Strategy to deliver more and better jobs and for ensuring that no one is denied access to them. The initiative tests and promotes new means of combating forms of discrimination and inequalities in the labour market and for those seeking work. It acts as a test-bed for the European Social Fund as a whole.

Equal Brighton & Hove is a city-wide initiative that supports adults into training and employment by providing Equal funding to over 35 projects delivered by a partnership of more than 50 organisations. The projects work with 11 identified target groups that experience difficulty in accessing conventional routes to learning and work, offering them a range of services, from training and qualifications, to work placements and information advice and guidance. The overall aim of Equal Brighton & Hove is to increase the employability of disadvantaged local people and break down barriers they may face to employment, and to provide a skilled labour pool for employers within the city.

The final phase of the Equal Brighton & Hove programme, Action 3, builds on the research expertise amongst the universities of Brighton and Sussex and the key messages identified by the Equal Core Team. It aims to identify good practice in local projects and partnerships, to disseminate this as widely as possible, and to mainstream these approaches to influence strategy, policy and practice locally, regionally, nationally and across the EU.

Introduction

This briefing paper focuses on research on constraints and solutions for lone parents in Brighton & Hove accessing education and training. It draws on perspectives of service users and providers. Service users had accessed help through an Action 2¹ (A2) Project, though they were not necessarily currently doing so.

Key findings

Motivation

Interviews with lone parents found the key motivations for engaging with education or training courses to be equally divided between developing employment skills and personal development. Individuals wanted to develop employment skills to re-enter employment, or to help achieve more financially and/or personally satisfying work.

Those motivated by personal development wanted to do something for themselves, to not be 'just' parents, and to gain a sense of achievement and enjoyment. The next most important motivations were to provide positive role models for children or to keep busy and prevent boredom. From their work with lone parents, service providers emphasised the significance of personal over monetary motivations.

Further significant motivations for engaging with courses included gaining qualifications, relationship breakdown, getting off benefits, achieving stability of income, and providing for children.

Most lone parents discussed several of the motivations discussed in this section.

¹ Action 2 is the project delivery stage of Equal Brighton & Hove

Barriers/constraints

Much work has focused on barriers to learning and employment for disadvantaged groups. The suggestion that barriers to lone parents' employment can more accurately be seen as 'constraints' (Mansour, 2005), is also relevant to education and training. While barriers can be removed, solving them once and for all, constraints must be repeatedly negotiated, as with meeting lone parents' child care needs. Though the barrier may be solved through providing a child care place; to stay in work or training, lone parents must keep negotiating rebooking, cost, travel, children's reluctance to attend, illness, school holidays and inset days, and meeting the child care needs of older children.

Child care was the most overwhelmingly prevalent barrier to education and training cited by lone parents. Though cost and lack of provision were important, the key problem was that being the sole carer, lone parents did not want their children in too much child care.

The next major barrier for lone parents was illness, injury or surgery. This fits with findings from One Parent Families that twice as many lone parents as partnered parents describe their health as poor, with over a quarter suffering from a long standing illness or disability (2007).

Service providers highlighted the constraint of lone parents caring for children with disabilities or Special Educational Needs (SEN), fitting with One Parent Families' findings that lone parent families are disproportionately likely to have at least one child with a disability or long-standing illness (2007).

Financial constraints were significant, including meeting travel costs and course fees, and lack of computer, internet or phone access at home. Further issues included distance between home and place of learning, time commitment, and feeling too old. Others felt limited by lack of basic qualifications, or that being better off on benefits or lack of jobs made it not worth

engaging with training. Service providers emphasised that lone parents have the same outgoings as other families but only one income. They also highlighted the inflexibility of the benefit system and anxiety caused by entitlement errors and payment delays.

Service users and providers identified lack of information as constraining lone parents' access to education and training, suggesting that those who most need services are often hardest to reach. Both groups underlined the role of schools and children's centres in informing lone parents about opportunities.

Other barriers/constraints highlighted by service providers were lack of geographical mobility, particularly for those in council accommodation, as well as debt, and financial constraints in terms of child care, travel and additional costs such as lunches at college.

Solutions

Lone parents indicated a range of factors making it easier for them to engage with education and training. The key point was that it becomes easier as children become older. Other significant factors were help with course fees and child care costs, and courses fitting with school hours. Grandparents, new partners and non-custodial parents were important in providing child care. Further factors included children being happy with school or child care provider, and only needing to source child care occasionally rather than as routine.

Increased finances were unsurprisingly reported to improve access to education and training. This included maintenance payments from non-custodial parents, extended family helping financially, and the means to finance course fees through payment in instalments, an Income Support Budgeting Loan or unexpected windfall. Lone parents said there should be more financial incentive to retrain rather than remain on Income Support and greater provision of work-based training, more closely relating learning investments to employment outcomes.

Additional resources facilitating educational engagement included a garden or safe space for children to play outside, for family well-being and to alleviate overcrowded living conditions, enabling parents to study. Also cited were home or local community centre computer/wireless laptop/internet access, assistance purchasing course materials like tracksuit and trainers for fitness training courses, and travel arrangements like car use, free transport to courses, or assistance purchasing a bike.

More information about courses was said to be needed, with Connexions' role in providing careers advice underlined, and service providers emphasising the need for greater cooperation between agencies. Lone parents wanted counselling access as part of course provision. This seems appropriate given that in many cases lone parents are fleeing violent relationships, being more than three times as likely as women in other types of household to have experienced domestic violence (One Parent Families, 2007). Experiences of domestic violence emerged in interviews with service users.

Benefits

The benefits lone parents experienced from education and training encompassed the two broad areas they were motivated by, career and personal development. Individuals discussed work-related benefits of gaining qualifications, CV building and fulfilling job centre requirements, and personal benefits including self-confidence, mental stimulation, enjoyment, life satisfaction, self-identity beyond children, and providing a positive role model for children. By far the most overwhelming benefit of engaging with courses though, was the social contact of meeting new people. Service providers emphasised that lone parents often make highly motivated students, bringing transferable skills like time management when they (re)enter work and training.

Background

Nationally, over one in four families are now headed by a lone parent (ONS, 2005) who are disproportionately low skilled (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001). A substantial body of research shows educational engagement to hold important benefits to the lives of lone parents and their families, including enhanced employability, confidence and self-esteem, and inter-generational benefits in terms of parenting and role models.

Recently the government's Leitch (2006) and Freud (2007) reports have highlighted the agenda of utilising compulsion to return lone parents to employment. Evidence shows lone parents want to work (Zachry, 2005). But given particularly high child care costs in the UK, and government child care subsidies that do not cover the whole of costs, often only well-paid work is viable for lone parents. For the large number of lone parents lacking qualifications, education and training is the only way of achieving this. The gap in support for training for lone parents at Level 3 in particular is considered problematic.

Methodology

There were two phases to the research, involving lone parent service users and service providers working with lone parents. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted over six weeks, with service users from A2 projects who were lone parents. Lone parents were aged between 16 and 46, and had children aged 10 months to 24 years, though all had at least one dependent child (under 16 or under 18 and in full-time education).

Participants were given a £15 voucher for their time and some were paid travel costs. The research was undertaken within the guidelines set out by the University of Sussex Research Governance Committee. Interview participants were given plain

language information about the research in advance and asked to sign an informed consent form detailing issues around confidentiality, anonymity and withdrawing from the research.

Participants were currently or recently engaged with educational or training courses of any level and subject area. As part of the interviews, participants completed timelines of their lives, showing when key events had taken place including episodes of work and education, and how positive these had been.

Interview findings fed into a focus group workshop for 13 service providers (including from A2 projects) and researchers working with lone parents. Two of the lone parent interviewees also participated. The focus of the workshop was to disseminate findings, share perspectives, and incorporate service providers' insights.

Perspectives of service users and providers complemented and validated each other, raising similar key issues. While service users contributed first-hand experience, service providers shared experiences working with a large number of lone parents.

Conclusion

- Lone parents' potential to benefit from educational opportunities is compromised by lack of accurate information, bureaucratic problems, and inconsistent funding provision.
- Agencies working with lone parents need to be more approachable so that service users feel able to seek advice from them.

- Lone parents resist agendas to compel them to work, with or without training, because their priority is not to have children in 'too much' child care. Lone parents are not primarily financially motivated and service providers resist the contemporary emphasis on employment as the only solution to child poverty for lone parent families (Freud, 2007).
- Though more subsidised child care provision is needed, temporarily promoted options like extended schools are rejected by service providers and service users as impractical and undesirable. Solutions like greater flexibility permitting lone parents to complete learning courses at home should be promoted.
- The importance of family, non-custodial parents and new partners in providing financial and practical support suggests that informal networks are plugging gaps in provision not met by formal structures. This has implications for lack of access amongst lone parents without such informal support structures.
- Lone parents' lack of geographical mobility determines need for extension of localised provision. Also needed is more consistent funding provision across levels, including for academic as well as vocationally orientated courses, the focus being on long-term sustainable independence.
- More research needs to be undertaken on those 'hard to reach' lone parents who have not accessed education and training.
- Follow-up research is needed of lone parents' progression after engaging with educational and training courses.

References

Freud, D. (2007) *Reducing dependency, increasing opportunity: options for the future of welfare to work*. An Independent Report to the Department for Work and Pensions.

Leitch, S. (2006) *Prosperity for all in the global economy: world class skills*. London: HM Treasury

Mansour, J. (2005) *Skills and sustainable welfare-to-work*. London: Work Directions

Millar, J., and Rowlingson, K. (2001) *Lone parents, employment and social policy: cross-national comparisons*. Bristol: The Policy Press

Office for National Statistics (2005) Focus on Families Archive: Dependent Children: 1 in 4 in lone-parent families [online] Available from:
<http://216.239.59.104/search?q=cache:v8AWgtqS9MIJ:www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp%3FID%3D1163+office+national+statistics+lone+parents&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=uk> [accessed 28 September 2007]

One Parent Families (2007) *One parent families today: the facts*. London: One parent families/Gingerbread

Zachry, E. M. (2005) Getting my education: Teen mothers' experiences in school before and after motherhood. *Teacher's College Record*, 107 (12) pp. 2566–2598.

Additional information

This paper is one in a series as follows:

Briefing Papers

Cecil, L. (2007) *Corporate Social Responsibility: a review*

Conlan, N. (2007) *Partnership Practices and Equal Brighton & Hove*

Hinton-Smith, T. (2007) *Lone parents in Brighton & Hove: engagement with education and training*

Hyde, S. and Cecil, L. (2007) *Employer Engagement and Equal Brighton & Hove*

Hyde, S. and Cecil, L. (2007) *Innovation and Equal Brighton & Hove*

McDonnell, E. and Beauclair, A. (2007) *Empowerment and Equal Brighton & Hove*

McDonnell, E. and Beauclair, A. (2007) *Equal Opportunities, Diversity and Equal Brighton & Hove*

Policy Paper

Boice, M. and Booker, C. (2007) *Barriers to Employment and Employability*

(A series of CCE reports were also commissioned on barriers to employment for the following groups: Refugees and Asylum Seekers; Drug and Alcohol Addicted People; Homeless People; Ex-Offenders; Roma and Travellers; and People from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups.)

The full Policy Reports related to the above briefings will be published in October 2007. Provisional titles are:

Barriers

Employer Engagement

Equal Opportunities and Empowerment

Innovation

Partnership

Please see details overleaf of how to obtain copies of any of these reports and papers.

This report was published by the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Sussex.

For further information about this project, and for copies of this or any of the other Reports and Papers listed overleaf, please contact

Centre for Continuing Education
The Sussex Institute
Essex House
University of Sussex
Falmer
Brighton BN1 9QQ
UK

T +44 (0)1273 877888

F +44 (0)1273 877534

E si-enquiries@sussex.ac.uk

www.sussex.ac.uk/cce/1-4-15-9.html

For information about the Equal Brighton & Hove Development Partnership, please see

www.equalbrightonandhove.org

